

BIBLIOGRAPHIC CITATION:

Zoubek, Anthony. "Michael Moore and the Awful Truth." P.O.V. Indiana:
AuthorHouse Books, 2004: 1-32.

Michael Moore & The Awful Truth

**'Bowling for Columbine'
and what it implies of truth
in the documentary film genre**



"I have invited my fellow documentary nominees on the stage with us, and we would like to—they are here, in solidarity with me, because we like nonfiction. We like nonfiction and we live in fictitious times. Whether it's the fictions of duct tape or fictions of orange alerts, we are against this war."

—Michael Moore's booed Best Documentary Oscar acceptance speech as broadcast¹ on ABC Television at the onset of Operation Iraqi Freedom.

"I was backstage when Moore met with hundreds of reporters and lectured us. 'Do your jobs!' he commanded, before making the ludicrous claim that only 'five people' had booed his speech.

"Talk about your instant revisionist history."

—Film critic Richard Roeper reporting from the Oscars for the *Chicago Sun-Times*.

FROM AS EARLY AS I CAN REMEMBER, I was obsessed with 1950s kitsch culture—soda jerks, chicks in poodle skirts, pompadours and the like—and, as a novice cinema enthusiast, considered “Rebel Without a Cause” (1955) the greatest film ever made. That changed when journalist peers and fellow cinephiles suggested I see “Roger & Me” (1989), writer-director Michael Moore’s comedic hybrid of muckraking and guerrilla filmmaking. The documentary (which could aptly be renamed, “Rebel *With* a Cause... and a movie camera, and a microphone...”) immediately appropriated the top spot on my personal best-of list.

Moore is the rebel in “Roger & Me,” and he, too, is enamored with the 1950s—an era in which his utopian hometown of Flint, Michigan seemed to turn the American Dream into a reality. In the 1980s, however—even as they made record profits in the billions—General Motors closed Michigan automobile manufacturing plants aplenty and laid-off much of Flint’s workforce. Moore motored about the state and filmed his misadventures in trying to convince GM’s chief executive, Roger Smith, to visit Flint and see the devastation debatably caused by the plant closings.

Moore’s polemics seemed like the rally cry of a nostalgic, engaging, enraged (and enraging) middleclass Midwesterner on the outside looking in—and I loved every minute of it. Sure, “Roger & Me” contained the content flubs noted by Harlan Jacobson (in his infamous November-December 1989 *Film Comment* interview with Moore) and the late *New Yorker* film critic Pauline Kael (whose damning critique is considered by scholarly sects the reason why “Roger & Me” did not receive an Academy Award nomination). In his editing, Moore purposefully fiddled with the time sequence of GM factory shutdowns

¹ Moore changed his speech (most notably in removing the made-up term “fictions”) in the text version posted on his personal webpage. The tweaks were minor and harmless. Regardless, they represent revisions to what he “truthfully” said.

and compressed other key events to fit the movie's framework.

But that meant nothing to me watching "Roger & Me" for the first time. Jacobson and Kael's nitpickings were overshadowed by the movie review of a fellow Midwest native—*Chicago Sun-Times* and Buena Vista Television film critic Roger Ebert. "The genius of 'Roger & Me' is that it understands the image-manipulating machinery of corporate public relations and fights back with the same cynicism and cleverness," Ebert wrote in his original 1989 critique.

In other words, if Moore was lying for fun and profit, he was doing so only in an effort to mimic the lies of corporate profiteers. His ends justified his means.

That was acceptable enough to me—at the time.

FLASH-FORWARD TO THE DEATH OF "Moore the Midwesterner" and the birth of "Moore the Celebrity." No longer does he live amongst Flint's masses² but claims in his diatribes to still have his blue-collar roots firmly planted. In "Bowling for Columbine" (2002), Moore announces his topic like he did in "Roger & Me"—by recalling his dream childhood in Flint. "Moore puts on this trait much as he wears his baseball cap," *The Nation* film critic Stuart Klawans pointed out in a November-December 2002 *Film Comment* article. "It's a sign, meant to establish a rapport with the audience by proving he's like us."

Yet, most of "us" will not see our books on worldwide bestseller lists, where Moore's *Stupid White Men* sat for most of 2002 and *Dude, Where's My Country?* sat throughout 2003. Nor will "we" be selected by *Entertainment Weekly* as an "Entertainer of the Year," or by the BBC as

² There is some question as to whether Moore resided in Flint at all. I spoke to one of Moore's high school classmates, who asked to remain nameless. Moore went to school in Davison, Michigan—25 miles east of Flint. "Growing up in Davison and telling the world you are from Flint is like growing up in Bloomfield Hills and saying you are from Detroit," Moore's classmate said. "It just doesn't cut it."

the number one “Newsmaker of the Year.” Moore took both titles after “Columbine” became the highest-grossing documentary of all-time.

The movie—one of the most contested and written about in motion picture history—also became the first documentary ever to win Best Original Screenplay from the Writers Guild of America. Over 100 film critics put it on their end-of-the-year Top 10 lists. At the Cannes Film Festival, the jury unanimously awarded Moore their 55th Anniversary Prize and prompted the longest standing ovation in the event’s history. “Almost 20 minutes by my watch count,” wrote *Chicago Tribune* film critic Michael Wilmington, “and that says something about both America and the ways we’re perceived abroad.” (As reported by the *Pittsburgh Tribune-Review*, Moore also received the Cannes Prix Educational National award, making his movie a certified part of the French national curriculum³.)

“Bowling for Columbine” arrived on home video curtailed by more controversy than it saw during its theatrical run. Dan Lyons in *Forbes* magazine, Ben Fritz in the *Orange County Register* and attorney David T. Hardy published articles and essays from which just about every other post-Oscar-ceremony critique of “Bowling for Columbine” derived its information. Lyons, Fritz and Hardy were the first to accuse “Columbine” of shortcoming the documentary genre’s purported task—telling the truth.

That is, if you believe documentaries are required to be truthful in the first place.

MY CONFUSION AS A FORMER MOORE FAN
is not the result of reading the *Forbes*, *Orange County Register* and Hardy treatises. *Forbes* claimed that “Bowling for Columbine” places sole blame for the school shooting by a Michigan youth on the work-

³ The special edition “Bowling for Columbine” DVD comes with a teacher’s guide.

to-welfare program that prevented the boy's mother from spending time with him. *Forbes'* fingerpointing lacked merit because Moore *does* mention the mother sent the boy to live in a house where her brother kept drugs and a gun.

An indictment made in the *Orange County Register*—that the theatrical version of “Columbine” altered footage of an ad run by the Bush-Quayle campaign in 1988—also lacked credence. “Trying to make a point about how racial symbols have been used to scare the American public,” Fritz wrote, “[Moore] shows the Bush-Quayle ad called ‘Revolving Doors,’ which attacked Michael Dukakis for a Massachusetts prison furlough program by showing prisoners entering and exiting prison. Superimposed over the footage is the text ‘Willie Horton released. Then kills again.’ This caption is displayed as if part of the original ad.”

Watching the scene again, I wasn't so sure. Moore uses the same superimposed subtitle font from the film's beginning to end. Anyone with a keen enough eye can tell that the caption is blatantly Moore's commentary on the ad and not insinuatory visual trickery. (Fritz did have a point about Moore's legitimately placed caption being incorrect in its meaning. Horton did not kill anyone on furlough—he raped a woman. For the VHS and DVD release of “Columbine,” Moore corrected the content of his legitimately placed title card.)

In his online essay, Hardy questioned why “Columbine” won its Academy Award when it includes staged scenes and facts taken out of context. “[Moore] won the Oscar for best documentary,” Hardy wrote. “Unfortunately, it is not a documentary, by the Academy's own definition.... One need only consult Rule 12 of rules for the Academy Award: a documentary is a non-fictional movie.”

Hardy neglected to mention that Rule 12 defines a documentary as a movie that deals “creatively with cultural, artistic, historical, social,

scientific, economic or other subjects. It may be photographed in actual occurrence, or may employ partial re-enactment," so long as "the emphasis is on fact and not fiction." The Academy's definition of a documentary—not Hardy's definition of the definition—accurately describes Moore's "creative toying" with factual details.

Mary Ann Hult, executive director of national publicity for "Bowling for Columbine," said United Artists went "back and forth" on issues raised by the *Forbes* article in particular. "In the end, Michael is able to prove most of the points that *Forbes* disputed," Hult said. "Therefore, we stand by Michael and we stand by the film.

"If you actually go to the essence of Michael's notes and where he came up with his information, it is all verifiable."

I'VE HEARD THE CLAIM MADE BY Moore's defenders that, for all intents and purposes, conservative media outlets like *Forbes* and the *Orange County Register* published their reports solely to discredit the liberal grounds on which Moore stands. A moderate leftist without political bones to pick, I sought my own answers regarding three of "Bowling for Columbine's" contradictory scenes.

MICHAEL AT THE BANK

North Country Bank & Trust of Traverse City, Michigan appears in an introductory "Columbine" sequence. Moore discovers an ad in a local Michigan paper touting that, if you open an account at North Country Bank & Trust, the bank will give you a gun. Moore goes to the bank, is greeted by a customer service representative and moves on to an unnamed teller who helps Moore open an account. The bank, Moore discovers, is also a licensed firearms dealer.

Moments later, Moore is handed a rifle in the bank lobby. He asks another unnamed bank employee, "Do you think it's a little dangerous handing out guns in a bank?" Before the employee can respond,

Moore turns his inquiry into a humorous payoff by cueing Teenage Fanclub's "Take the Skinheads Bowling," the tune to which he marches out of the building.

"That we would give out guns in the bank is very untrue," explained Helen Steinman, the customer service representative seen greeting Moore in the bank. "Under the account Moore opened, instead of getting interest on a CD, you get a gun. But before you get the gun, there's a ton of paperwork that has to be done. We have to do the background check. There has to be a designated place where you pick up the gun—at a gun shop. You can't just come in here and get a gun."

Nor does the bank "just hand you the gun," Steinman added. "No way—*no way*. That was very misrepresentative on Moore's part. [The bank] didn't realize Moore would be insinuating what he insinuated."

In the online essay "How to Deal with the Lies and the Lying Liars When They Lie about 'Bowling for Columbine,'" Moore wrote that the bank scene was not staged and is shown exactly how it was shot.



Moore visits a bank, opens up an account and walks out the same day with a free gift—a new rifle. A bank official said the scene was staged. (Media Credit: MGM)

"Nothing was done out of the ordinary other than to phone ahead and ask permission to let me bring a camera in to film me opening up my account," Moore stated.

Moore did phone ahead, Steinman said—to confirm that he was "only supposed to be coming in and pretending to open up a CD," Steinman explained. "What the girl who opened up the account really told him was that there would be a background check and that he wouldn't get the gun for six weeks."

The special edition "Bowling for Columbine" DVD does not contain any outtakes or scenes deleted from the final cut of the film. However, on his official webpage, Moore posted unedited footage from the bank scene to merit "Columbine's" claims. In it, the teller explains to Moore that North Country Bank & Trust has a safe filled with guns—Moore can pick out any one that is "available." (Curiously, the raw footage fades to black before Moore asks, "Do you think it's a little dangerous handing out guns in a bank?" As was the case in the finished film, viewers do not get to hear the bank employee's answer.)

According to Steinman, North Country Bank & Trust does have a safe in which they keep one of each kind of gun the bank offers to CD-opening customers. However, the guns are for display purposes only. Steinman said the bank does not actually "hand them out" and that regular customers familiar with the account-opening process have come in with questions about the "confusing" sequence from the film.

"We just have to tell them that what they saw is not what happened and that's not the way we do business," Steinman added.

Hult said Moore assured United Artists the bank sequence happened exactly the way it was shown.

"Very early on, I had a conversation with one of the kids who worked at the bank because they wanted to come to a screening of the movie," Hult said. "It all seemed true to them then, so I do not know



Columbine High School.

"So you don't think," Moore asks, "[that] our kids say to themselves, 'Well gee, you know dad goes off to the factory every day and, you know, he built missiles,' these are weapons of mass destruction. What's the difference between that mass destruction and the mass destruction over at Columbine High School?"

"I guess I don't see that connection," McCollum answers.

Moments later, Moore explains in voiceover narration that "once a month, Lockheed transports one of its rockets, with its Pentagon payload, through the streets of Littleton, passing nearby Columbine High School on its way to an air force base on the other side of Denver. The rockets are transported in the middle of the night, while the children of Columbine are asleep."

What Moore doesn't explain is the difference between rockets and missiles. Littleton's Lockheed plant manufactures the former and not the latter.

"We do ship our rockets in the middle of the night," McCollum said when I spoke to him shortly after "Columbine's" theatrical release. "What [Moore] is implying is that we don't want people to see these big bad weapons. But they aren't weapons—these rockets are communication vehicles and they launch communication satellites for Direct TV and weather satellites. These are *not* weapons of mass destruction."

The rockets are shipped in the middle of the night, McCollum explained, "because these launch vehicles are extremely large. There is a convoy and some 14 other vehicles used to make sure the rockets don't hit anyone or hit any overpasses or overhanging wires, lights and so on. It would not be wise of us to make that transport during daylight hours when there is more traffic. We do it in the middle of the night, when there is virtually no traffic, to save people grief on the

highways."

Lockheed is "probably the largest weapons supplier in the United States," McCollum admitted. "I don't know about the world. But our facilities near Denver have nothing to do with weapons."

"The Titan 2 [weather satellite rocket] I was standing in front during the interview was refurbished," McCollum concluded. "The insinuation that I am standing in front of a weapon of mass destruction is misleading."

Moore's producer and wife, Kathleen Glynn, called McCollum and "said she was from a small production company out of New York and that they were doing a documentary about suburban American life," McCollum explained. "She said they just happened to be filming in a suburb of Denver. 'We understand you guys are a major employer here, and we saw a news story about a contribution you made to the Jefferson County School District, which includes Columbine, and, gosh, we would really like to talk to you about that,' [and that alone]."

"Moore's people lied to me to get me to talk to them in the first place."⁴

TO BOWL OR NOT TO BOWL

In his "Bowling for Columbine" voiceover narration, Moore says the morning before the Columbine shootings was "pretty much like any other morning in America. The farmer did his chores. The milkman made his deliveries. The president bombed another country whose name we couldn't pronounce.... And out in a little town in Colorado, two boys went bowling at six in the morning."

Forty minutes into the film, Moore shows us stock footage of a news conference at which Jefferson County Deputy Sheriff Steve Davis fields questions shortly after the massacre.

⁴ On his website, Moore jokingly claims he convinced Lockheed to let him into their plant by "[threatening] them with bombing."

"What were the suspects doing the morning of attack?" Davis says, repeating a reporter's question. "I told you, that I'd *heard* they were bowling."

Hence the movie's title. In a "Frequently Asked Questions" section of the official "Bowling for Columbine" website, Moore states his film's name "is taken from the little-known fact that the two killers, Dylan and Eric, were supposed to be in bowling class at Columbine High School on the morning of the murders. At least five witnesses, including their teacher, told the police that they saw one or both boys that morning at the bowling alley for their first-hour class."

Kate Battan of the Jefferson County Sheriff's Department was the lead investigator on the Columbine shootings case. She said if Moore "wants to take one or two or three reports out of thousands of pages of documents and say, 'see—it says right here that they were in bowling class that day' and call that a 'fact,' then he can do that.

"I think that, in any documentary, there is going to be a bit of artistic license," Battan added. "Otherwise, it would be kind of a boring movie. There are some things that we dispute, like Moore's claim that [Eric and Dylan] went to their bowling class that day. Initially, some of the Columbine students who were interviewed said they saw the boys in bowling class. We later found out, through talking to the teacher and through other evidence, that we do not believe Eric and Dylan were in class that day."

Battan went and saw "Bowling for Columbine" as an "average Joe Citizen. I did not go there as an investigator with the Sheriff's Department to see whether or not the movie was accurate. Because it's Michael Moore's movie. The First Amendment—I believe in it. Michael Moore can say whatever he wants."

Battan said she has "no interest in starting a war" of words with Moore over the discrepancy. "I don't want to get the Columbine vic-

tim's families angry at us," she continued. "I don't want to get Michael Moore angry at us. It's been [a number of] years since the Columbine massacre. We're tired of everybody being angry at us.

"Whether or not [Eric and Dylan] were in bowling class that day is not the point of the movie. If someone thinks that was the point of the movie, then they didn't get it.

"I got it, and I agree with it."

ADMITTEDLY, SO DO I.

After the Columbine massacre, every media pundit pointed their proverbial gun aimed at the usual pop-culture targets. Putting scapegoats like Marilyn Manson in their crosshairs made about as much sense as blaming Brunswick for the violent tragedies.

But Moore *could* have easily said something to the effect of "people initially thought Eric and Dylan went bowling that day. They didn't, but no one could prove the boys were big fans of Marilyn Manson, either. Isn't it just as plausible to blame bowling as it is to blame Manson's music—or video games or violent movies or television shows?" Moore's message could have remained intact, without doubt's ugly shadow looming so closely at its side.

The steps Moore takes to present his metaphors as "facts" are troublesome. Before talking to Battan, I thought artistic license was a film director's right only in adapting plays, books and fictionalized accounts of reality-based events. Documentaries have implicitly truthful cores through which artistically licensed misrepresentations should not be tolerated. Otherwise, what is the difference between a scripted movie and a documentary if both types of films are allowed to construe their source material into something that is, even in the slightest bit, fictitious?

Deciding what constitutes truth in any Moore movie depends on

"what one decides constitutes 'truth' in any documentary," Dana Benelli, an assistant professor of theatre at Illinois State University, said. Over the last 10 years, Benelli taught documentary film courses at ISU, Clark University in Massachusetts, Tulane University in New Orleans and Carleton College in Minnesota. He continues to author scholarly essays on the relationship between Hollywood and documentary filmmaking.

According to Benelli, truth in documentary may be split into two categories.

"There is literal accuracy, as in the documentarian [having] all his facts straight," Benelli explained. "And then there is 'core truth,' that which is found in the significance of the situation being represented, through which errors in detail may not undermine the point of the documentary as a whole.

"That is one of the things I am inclined to think about 'Bowling for Columbine,'" Benelli continued. "Moore may be significantly warping some of his details, but the question about whether his basic take on the culture of violence in American society remains valid.

"Another issue, however, is the credibility of the person making the movie," Benelli explained. "That's where factuality and accuracy come to a head. To what degree are we inclined to believe Moore and what he is preaching to us? Is he making a straight documentary?

"If he is, then yes—he is breaking the rules by not giving you a straight story on the details he's calling your attention to.

"But I begin to wonder if Moore is just a prankster—if he is in fact playing the documentary form and, like 'This Is Spinal Tap' or films of that sort, making fun of documentaries by doing something that looks like a documentary to make his points," Benelli continued.

"From your research, you know that there are these nuances to the literal process of opening the bank account and getting a gun. Moore

might tell you those nuances are too complicated to put in the film and that he represents the bank in the way that he does to make a point about his worldview. Is it possible, for example, that we live in a society where we can walk into a bank, open an account and walk out with a gun?

"Moore might be asking us as a means of making us question how far our society has gone."

IN A *CHICAGO SUN-TIMES* ARTICLE assessing nominees of the 75th Annual Academy Awards, Ebert predicted "Bowling for Columbine" would take the Best Documentary prize despite "charges that [Moore] made up stuff. [Because] somehow you know, watching it, that Moore has granted himself poetic license."

Moore responded to Ebert's remarks with a letter published in Ebert's biweekly "The Movie Answer Man" column.

"I am sorry you had to reprint Internet crap in your column today," Moore wrote. "It is a lie to say anything but the following...."

"I was handed that gun in that bank and walked out with it and have it in my possession to this day. I NEVER had to go to any gun shop. The scene happened just the way you saw it. I'd be happy to send you all the raw footage...."

"The Columbine shooters DID go to the bowling alley that morning. I can supply you with the five witnesses, including their teacher. It's all there in the investigation conducted by the State of Colorado...."

"I don't understand why, after all these years, you would run stuff that wasn't true," Moore the Midwesterner concluded.

The "signature" on his letter read "Michael Moore, Flint, Michigan."⁵

Ebert and Roeper gave "Bowling for Columbine" two thumbs up on their nationally syndicated movie review show. Roeper recommended "Columbine" as "a piece of performance art" by Michael Moore who "I don't think [is] always being honest."

Roeper elaborated on his critique after I sent him an e-mail regarding his opinion of Moore's accuracy.

"The very act of filming something or someone alters the event itself," Roeper said. "There's no such thing as 'pure' documentary."

⁵ According to the Internet Movie Database, Moore the Celebrity admitted in a Fox News Channel interview that he currently resides in a \$1.9 million New York home.

However, some documentaries are more authentic than others. Moore, as he always admits, clearly has an agenda and is not interested in presenting a balanced look at the facts. He's interested in advancing his cause and creating humorous situations, often at the expense of the feelings of others, and certainly at the expense of the truth.

"'Bowling for Columbine' is an entertaining non-fiction film. I'm not so sure it's a documentary."

Roeper stands by his recommendation of the movie because "it does present some legitimate arguments about America's gun-mania, and it is an enjoyable piece of work as long as the audience understands that the filmmaker is a political satirist. [Moore] isn't a journalist."

Not so, said Dann Gire, Chicago *Daily Herald* film critic and president of the Chicago Film Critics Association, which gave "Bowling for Columbine" a Best Documentary prize at their annual awards ceremony. Gire said Moore practices what the late Northwestern University journalism professor Curtis McDougal called "interpretative reporting"—supporting his information through a point of view that engages an audience on a narrative level.

"I recall what [director] Bernardo Bertolucci told me back in 1987—'Movies are lies that tell the truth,'" Gire explained. "I suppose Moore's documentary is a movie that uses facts to tell the truth, but does it not by simply relating information, but by telling us a story."

Every documentary has an agenda, "whether it be to cause attention to something like Moore does or adopting a certain point of view," explained Erik Childress, Chicago Film Critics Association member and movie review contributor to eFilmCritic.com. "I think in this day and age, the whole concept of documentary has to be questioned. Look at any documentary and you can find staged incidents. Are we really to believe that [the makers of] filmic documents just happen to always

be at the right place at the right time?

"I wouldn't really consider Moore a journalist, as that's a title I believe has all but been eliminated in this tabloid, 'I will check the facts later' society," Childress continued. "He deals in the exaggerations and the ironies about the facts and life in general.

"I do not necessarily have a problem with his in-your-face tactics. What I do have a problem with is that he does not know when to quit."

Gire said he accepted Moore's staging of scenes as "dramatic devices to push the story along, give it some transitions and provide that narrative framework to make his film fascinating and revelatory on a level beyond the surface facts.

"[A] mere collection of facts conveyed has limited power to attract or hold viewers," Gire explained. "[To] tell a real story with a real protagonist in it is to give his collection of facts a personality and a motivation for viewers to be curious about what happens next."

"Whether the facts were twisted or not, the structure of the film plays like a great mystery," Childress added. "Getting down to the root of the problem is Moore's goal.

If he plays hard and loose with the facts to make a cohesive story—much the way biopics and true stories fudge with the facts for dramatic purposes—then that's what he'll do."



"I did see a private screening of ['Bowling for Columbine'] in late June [2002]. Very flawed filmmaking, but I don't mean dishonest documentary technique when I say that. I don't know the 'truth' on this one. I do know that Mike hugs too many victims, ambushes Dick Clark about bull-shit, and draws an absurd inference about Columbine, Littleton, and the heaviest day of bombing in Kosovo..."

"My comments [from the book Spike, Mike, Slackers and Dykes—that, in filmmaking, you can either start with fiction or documentary, but whichever you start with, you inevitably find the other] still represent my feelings about the 'greater truth' that 'Roger & Me' represented. I stand by that position years later, although Mike's self-aggrandizing ways have gone from bad to worse to truly egregious."

—John Pierson, in an e-mail to me regarding the "greater truths" of "Bowling for Columbine."

In 1989, Pierson worked for Moore as a producer's representative and sold "Roger & Me" to Warner Bros. for \$3 million.

IN DECEMBER 2002, the non-profit International Documentary Association polled 2,000 documentary filmmakers and compiled a Top 20 list of the greatest documentaries of all-time. The roster included "Nanook of the North" (1922), "Titicut Follies" (1967) and "The Thin Blue Line" (1988).

"Bowling for Columbine," the youngest movie on the list, was ranked No. 1.

Sarah Jo Marks, programs coordinator for the IDA, said "Columbine" made it to the top because "it's the documentary that's on everybody's mind right now. That's what I've been telling people who've had questions about why the film topped the list. Everyone has just seen the movie. If we tabulated the list [again], we don't know what changes there would be or how anyone would track it."

Aware of "Bowling for Columbine's" content contradictions, Marks would not comment on behalf of the IDA regarding the organization's criteria for what makes a movie a documentary.

"What I would feel comfortable saying is that 'Bowling for Columbine' is still a movie. Any documentary is still *just* a movie," Marks said. "It still requires editing and writing and lighting and all of the same elements a fiction film requires. In that way, you can manipulate the film to generate an audience's response the same way the music swells in 'Titanic' and 'Gone With The Wind' and you cry. That same emotion can be created through documentary manipulation."

Declaring "Bowling for Columbine" the greatest documentary of all time was not the first Moore-related controversy prompted by the IDA. In November 2002, the organization's *International Documentary* magazine published "Lock and Load," a two-page love letter to Moore, written by IDA Board of Directors member Michael Rose.

"Moore believes that when documentarians start with a rigid thesis and plan, it's a prescription for creating boring films," Rose wrote.

"To him, 'It's more interesting if I let you in on my sort of sense of discovery than if I start the documentary with a set agenda.'"

That quote caught the attention of Albert Maysles, the documentary filmmaker who, with his late brother David and the late filmmaker Charlotte Zwerin, co-directed "Salesman" (1969) and "Gimme Shelter" (1970). Both titles appeared on the IDA's list and are considered by scholars two of the greatest movies of any genre ever made.

Maysles responded to Rose's article with a letter published in the February 2003 issue of *International Documentary*.

"More than any other filmmaker, Moore has his mind set—and closed—from the start with the same dishonest and unethical method in hand: out to get his subject(s) by any means," Maysles wrote. "It's a shame Rose failed to let us in on the deceit and what might be the public's love for Moore's shenanigans."

Moore's films in general "are dishonest," Maysles explained after I called him regarding his letter. "He is out to get people, and he uses people to prove his points rather than allowing his cameras to discover what is really going on."

"Left to its own devices, the documentary filmmaker—in seeking the truth—has to be open-minded," Maysles continued. "Moore's mind is closed to everything but his own preconceptions."

Maysles admitted he has not seen "Columbine" for fear he "might start believing some of Moore's total fabrications." If he did see the movie, Maysles said he might actually agree with Moore's politics.

"But I will never agree with his methods, because they are shameful," Maysles explained. "An honest documentary would have been more ethical. Maybe by representing two sides instead of just one, Moore might've been able to convince those who do not already share his political views to put down their arms."

"Instead, he just waits and watches people damage themselves in

front of his cameras," Maysles continued. "He has made a statement in print that you don't always have to put people up to damaging themselves. That if you are watchful enough, they'd do you the favor by doing themselves in. Is that the way you make a truthful film? By being cynical? Is it a proper purpose to try and merely do people in? The guy brings us back to Nazi Germany, for Christ's sake.

"Michael Moore may not have the same purpose as Adolph Hitler, or *The Protocols of Zion*, but he does use the same methods."

A true documentary, Maysles said, is created when the filmmaker takes on events that are "going on now, when the filming is taking place, because then you don't need a reenactment, and you don't need a narrator or host.

"Moore is not finding the truth, because he is using all those things to create the truth," Maysles continued, impassioned. "I should not even dignify his low-grade documentary filmmaking with the word 'truth.' Because, to the extent that a filmmaker has biases and exercises them, he is not seeking the truth. And what he ends up with cannot and does not constitute anything but his own, one-sided agenda.

"What *fucking* good is a documentary, no matter how you define the genre, if it doesn't give us unfiltered knowledge of the real world? What good is knowledge of the real world if it is not even truthful?"

Maysles said it is possible to produce a truthful documentary. The process, however, requires filmmakers to submit themselves to self-control.

"If you control events, your film is no longer capturing reality," Maysles added. "Obviously we are all human beings, and there is a human limitation on our ability to seek out and record the truth. But some filmmakers can get closer to it than others. They do so, however, by not using Moore's methods. For if they did, their films would do nothing more than conform to their biases."

The shift from healthy skepticism to total cynicism in documentary filmmaking is to be blamed “on our culture’s new philosophy that you just can’t know anything for sure. And that spurns one of the saddest things [in documentary filmmaking], and that’s a filmmaker who, out of a sense of modesty or cynicism, looks at their own documentary work as a process of manipulation—he who believes that it is the job of a documentarian to carefully select what the audience sees and that, because you can never really tell the truth anyway, [why] even try telling the whole truth at all?

“If that’s how a filmmaker feels about it,” Maysles continued, “[and] if that’s the low regard they have for what they are doing, then they should be in some other business.

“Our culture is so confused about what the truth is and our ability to arrive at it,” Maysles added. “Most believe in the cynicism—that you can’t ever tell the truth. Others go overboard on the other end of the spectrum and believe that we all tell the truth. Those are the peo-



Moore buys gun bullets in a Michigan barbershop. (Media Credit: MGM)

ple who [went to see] 'Bowling for Columbine' in droves and bought into it because it's now the biggest documentary of all time and [won] awards everywhere.

"But that's the hypocrisy," Maysles concluded. "It's the judge who turns to the witness-to-be and says, 'Do you swear to tell the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth, so help you God?'"

"I've yet to hear of a single witness who has answered, 'Look, Mister—I'll do the best I can.'"

MOORE INTENDED TO SHOOT "Bowling for Columbine" on celluloid. Midway through the production, the choice was made to switch to high-definition video. Enter cameraman Michael McDonough, who previously worked with Maysles and shot many Moore-directed music videos. McDonough estimated that he shot "roughly 60 percent" of the footage in "Columbine's" final cut.

"Moore is a genius," McDonough said when I spoke to him shortly after the 75th Annual Academy Awards. "He is a fantastic filmmaker. Shooting many of the film's interviews—[Charlton] Heston, Marilyn Manson, all of the Columbine footage—was very moving. There were moments where I was crying into my [camera] eyepiece."

McDonough admitted "there is recreation in 'Bowling for Columbine.' There are cutaways, and there is some B-roll footage. These elements exist because that's just the way documentary films are shot.

"Basically it's there to make the story more understandable, to give the editors options so that they could cut a film that made sense," McDonough continued. "These are well-understood techniques. They are not in every single documentary you'll see, but probably nine out of every 10 documentaries has some form of recreation in them."

McDonough filmed Moore's interview with McCollum and said he

does not see how the scene falsely imputes Littleton's Lockheed plant with the production of WMD.

"Do you have proof that Lockheed Martin *doesn't* make weapons of mass destruction?" McDonough asked. "[What about] the stuff that Lockheed ships overnight, secretly, to various parts of the country? I am not saying one way or the other what those materials are, but find me proof that they don't make the stuff that goes into America's nuclear missile program. That's what people should be looking into.

"Lockheed Martin—maybe not [in Littleton] but at other [plants]—does make parts that go into these weapons, and that is a valid point for Michael to make," McDonough explained. "I was standing there, as cameraman, party to the interviews as they took place. From that perspective, I do not feel any [subject] questioned was misrepresented. It is all a process of filmmaking.

"You should write about how people are being killed by guns," McDonough continued. "Write a story going after Heston for going to various cities for political reasons right after those cities experience gun-related tragedies. Don't write about some cutaways."

It is naïve for viewers to think that, because they saw it in a documentary, it must be true, McDonough said, "because there is no truth. There is only your own perception of things. [Documentary filmmaking] is not about going out and saying, 'I am going to make this film, and it is going to be true.' It is about having ideas on a subject and presenting those ideas to an audience. 'Bowling for Columbine' is Michael Moore's idea of what is going on with gun control and what is going on in American society."

Filmic documents are filtered through the potential biases or agendas of their makers, McDonough said, "or at least, it is better to say that than to say that, because it is in a documentary, it represents truth.

"It can't. It's someone else's truth."